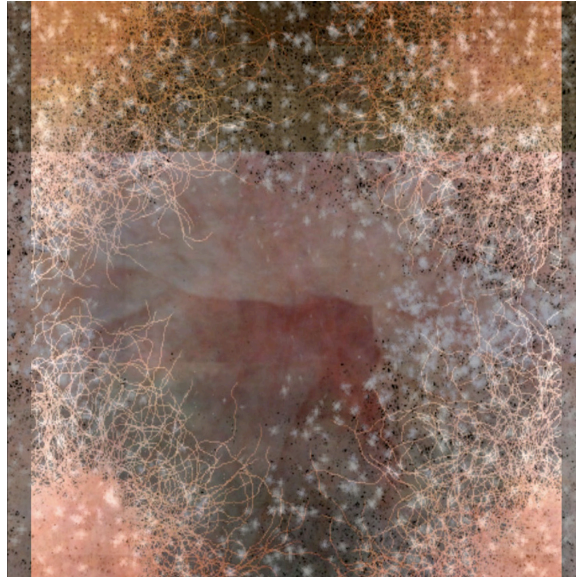


## *IF/THEN*

### *Viral Logarithmic and Algorithmic Connections*

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Joseph Nechvatal, “rear windOw curiOsités” (2012) 2x2m  
virus-modeled artificial life computer-robotic assisted painting on canvas

Today your perception of viruses likely has to do with the way you consider the coronavirus pandemic as a threatening invasion of ruthlessly efficient viral code into your body (its host). It may be an indelicate question at this point, but what can you, and culture writ large, learn from the exponential unleashing of viral codes, as they circulate and duplicate beneath the surface of your cultural and physical world?

To arrive at something of an answer, you must probe into obscurity — for the virus needs to shroud. Visually undetectable, its algorithmic exponential pulse is, however, felt, lurking in the shadows, stalking you. In this sense, viruses parallel the ubiquitous surveillance you associate with networked electronic information, and the flickering of its translucent forms. Indeed, the principles of algorithmic viruses — semi-autonomous, machine-vampiric pieces of digital code — are an essential trait of techno-cultural logic. Like these digital algorithmic viruses, actual deadly viruses can transform narratives precipitously — hence their beguiling, almost magical, powers.

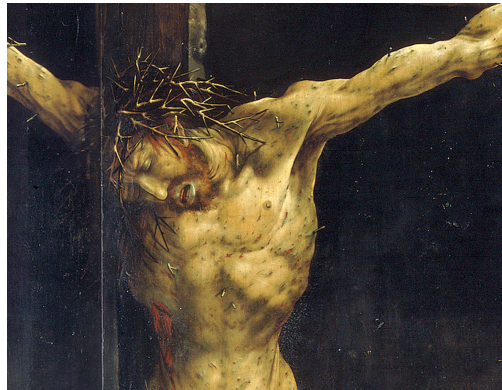
Idealistically, contemporary art is associated with such transformative originality, but, as you undoubtedly heard, on January 9th something genuinely new emerged that is now transforming contemporary art and rendering it nearly lifeless (for now). That day the World Health Organization announced the discovery of the novel coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2, responsible for the infectious respiratory disease COVID-19. Certainly its unprecedented viral uncertainties have already decimated many exhibition plans (including my own that was to open this week), while rattling aesthetic assumptions about form and identity.

In his 1991 essay “*Viruses of the Mind*,” Richard Dawkins established his theory of religion as a meme — a contagious idea — that responds to two characteristic environmental conditions in order to exist and multiply. The first is the ability of a system to copy information accurately and, in case of errors, to copy errors accurately. The second is the system’s unconditional readiness to execute all instructions codified in the copied information within a host.

The chaotic invisibility of viruses is often supposed as innately irrational, like religious beliefs, but is not. Viruses — neither alive nor dead — function with a zombie algorithmic perfection, occasionally to deadly results. The infection and death numbers in France rise as I write (500 dead today). The Mulhouse-Colmar region has been especially heavily hit. A February megachurch meeting of around 2,000 charismatic La Porte Ouverte Chrétienne evangelical Christians in Mulhouse, with many infected attending, had the effect of a coronavirus bomb, first on Alsace, and then on all of France, as the participants spread throughout the country.

That Alsace region is where Mathias Grünewald’s masterpiece oil-on-wood polyptych painting “Isenheim Altarpiece” (circa 1516) is located, at the Musée d’Unterlinden in Colmar. The painting is pertinent to the coronavirus era because it teems with high-pitched, electrifying emotion that blends ecstasy with agony. A transcendent, visionary impulse comesling here with dark, macabre fatality, grounded in plague time, since the painting contains references to the Saint Anthony’s fire epidemic (aka ergotism). Grünewald created it for the St. Anthony Monks (who treated the epidemic with plant-extracted, tranquilizing balms) to be placed in their Hospital Monastery in Isenheim; intended for those praying to Saint Anthony the Hermit to help them avoid contracting the disease caused by excessive intake of ergot fungi. Besides the suspended, crucified, pockmarked body of Christ in the first panel that is visually reminiscent of the AIDS viral epidemic — on the surface of the body advanced AIDS can manifest as

herpes simplex, herpes zoster (shingles), skin rashes, warts and ringworm — there is a fallen victim of the ergot epidemic horrifically depicted in the third panel.



Mathias Grünewald, “Isenheim Altarpiece” (circa 1516)  
(first panel, detail)



Mathias Grünewald, “Isenheim Altarpiece” (circa 1516)  
(third panel, detail)

Like the ergot epidemic shaping 16th-century French culture, algorithmic viruses — self-replicating computer programs that spread by inserting copies of themselves into other executable codes — shape ours. It shapes our global, networked media ecology, which includes digital art that uses coded technology as part of its creative or presentational process. An online virtual viral code’s explosive destructiveness may be programmed and activated from anywhere. Would you be shocked to learn that the Paris hospital authority, AP-HP, was the target of a cyber-attack on March 22, according to France’s cybersecurity agency ANSSI?

Such a virtual virus attack strikes deep like a biological virus attack — which spreads by inserting itself into living cells — because virtualization is the algorithmic double that accompanies everything cultural. This may account for why your feelings tilt towards anxiety over art appreciation (and market prices) being algorithmically influenced. Does not top-down culture give you the sneaking suspicion that you have been taken control of from within, with Circean willfulness, by the ignobility of ratcheted-up algorithms? Perhaps your mind has become the penetrated materiality of viral memes asserting themselves? Do you not bristle at your identity, taste, cultural habits and relationships being used as hosts in opaque, algorithmic processes of evaluation?

Indeed, digital viruses are the completing culmination of postmodernism, as they, by definition, are merger machines based on parasitism and acculturation. So, it is not only their symbolic or metaphoric power that places them firmly in a wider perspective of cultural importance; it is their formal structure. As Jean Baudrillard said in *Cool Memories*, a virus is an ultra-modern form of communication which does not distinguish between information and its carrier.

You may wonder about whether actual viruses are living organisms or not — since a virus has to hijack another organism's biological machinery to replicate, which it does by inserting its DNA into a host cell. You may call the virtual viral force artificial intelligence, or machine learning, or neural networks that run on if/then programmed scripts. But the psychic machinery of both viruses, like terrorism, is your unseen enemy, churning invisibly, absolutely, always potentially present.

Curiously, the if/then program of the coronavirus cuts across social categories and is the great equalizer of the day. For SARS-CoV-2, you are, at long last, just the right color, the right shape, the right sex, and have the right intelligence and personality (though it apparently particularly ravishes the aged). SARS-CoV-2 procures its actuality from your encircling environment of human hosts, to which it is receptively coupled. Like a digital virus, it is both medium and message. As such, the viral algorithm, now the central cultural trope of our world, may also be read as a meditation on your eventual, humiliating death — inclusive of its cruel and nasty comedy. You say you have projects and plans?

Locked-down at home, hiding, you are under ever-increasing pressure to conform, to survey, and be surveyed. Probably you are not against this temporary necessity of surveillance and

conformity, but these are the perfect conditions in which totalitarianism flourishes. It is ruinous for the creation of daring new art, and effects the shrinking of places that exhibit nonconformist acts of imaginative spontaneity. You may pour your aesthetic energies into your stay-at-home work, but algorithmic cultural calculus is an obstacle you must overcome to realize your aesthetic freedom. Pathetically, algorithm-driven popular culture that uses optimization-driven, actor-critic, neural network for deep learning emotion analysis (such as Apache MXNet, the deep learning framework in Amazon) puts your cultural choices to work even in your imposed quarantined space of leisure. Probably you have little access to art with which to inoculate yourself and think unpredictably with. You dwell in a viral copy culture of increasing cultural homogenization as Google tracks and guides your tastes.

But, ideally, contemporary art stands against the copy format, which is the classical art thing. In face of contemporary art's challenging stimulus, you enter into yourself and re-emerge with expanded capacities you never knew were there, resisting algorithms that accurately predict what you would like to see and buy, or to whom you are sexually attracted. Actor-critic neural network prompts make your desires feel paltry and your fate predestined — not in a supernatural way, but in an inflexible, machine-like, sad, and sinister way.

So epidemic-contextualized art, like Grünewald's, may provide you the chance to do the counter-fearful thing: to look lovingly at what you dread so that you will be released from the airy irrationality of this dread and permit your unconscious life to do as it pleases. To do so, you must fabricate a beautiful if complicated forensic fairy-tale out of your recent artistic and social interactions. I have been doing just that with Alonso Cedillo, the post-internet artist in Mexico City, exchanging emails about what we both see as the new viral epoch (in multiple senses). His stained 3D printed sculpture "Oil Venus" (2018) first suggests a re-contextualized Neoclassical period to me, but I found its degraded romanticism also provoking added admiration for my replica of the ancient "Vénus de Lespuge" figurine (circa 27,000 BC). This kind of time-distance slippage enlarged and deepened our viral conversation considerably as our minds connected over a great distance. The viral sound work of James Hoff is relevant here also, and connects with my *Viral Venture* (2009) animation and *viral symphony* (2008) sound work.

You may now assume that both types of viruses — the virtual and the actual — point you towards distasteful death, that inconceivable, incurable, and deeply ridiculous affliction. But consider this: Although actual viruses were originally discovered and characterized on the basis

of the disease and death they caused, most viruses are helpful to life in that they rapidly transfer genetic information from one bacterium to another, helping their hosts survive in hostile environments. It once was taken as scripture that you are living during the Anthropocene, with the human race heading towards extinction. But with you staying home, the rate of human pollution is down.



Anonymous “Memento Mori” (19th century) print  
Collection of the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris

So by now, cultural considerations of viral algorithmic code should remind you of *memento mori* — the Latin term meaning “remember you die” — and how such considerations can stimulate (your) life juices. You may, in light of *memento mori*, appreciate all of life more, given its inevitable doom. The question is: how do you feed your pleasure in art in face of the mounting coronavirus mortality rate? This is something beyond the powers of artistic narration.

Joseph Nechvatal